Start the New Year RIGHT

IT IS NOW JANUARY OF THE YEAR 2001! Are your bees ALIVE? Depleted in population? Hungry? Is there still 40-50 pounds of food still present? Diseased? Is there any brood? Is the queen alive? Is she more than a year old? Is the bottom brood chamber EMPTY of brood and honey? Have you removed all Apistan strips or Check Mite strips? Has the hive tilted so rainwater can lay on the bottom board? Did you get new bee books for Christmas? Have you read the parts about disease, reversing, requeening, outside water supply yet, or just that part about "how to make more honey?

There are 13 questions above. Most beeKEEPERS could honestly answer at least 10-11; but most beeHAVERS probably could not honestly answer more than 2-3. This is early January, so it is not too late for every reader to be able to honestly answer every question before February 1st. I will help you in my writing with descriptions.

First, and MOST IMPORTANT, you cannot determine the health of a hive by looking at the outside. Even your doctor checks your temperature, looks at your tongue, listens to your heart and lungs rather than just looking at your face and shaking your hand. LOOK INSIDE your hive! Take off 2-3 hours from work on a nice SUNNY day with NO wind when the temperature is over 50¡, preferably 60¡. Look for BROOD - you don't have to see the queen. Examine the BROOD frames for disease: Foul Brood, Chalk Brood, Chilled brood, laying workers, and a solid pattern of brood or scattered like pepper. A tremendous number of beeHAVERS think their hive is alive because they see bees flying in and out of the entrance on every warm day, but the truth is: their bees are dead and the flying bees are bees robbing the honey and taking it back to their home. If you just can't find the time to open a hive on a warm day, go to the hive at night or a cold day, put your ear up against the hive wall and bang on the hive with your fist or a stick. If the hive is alive with lots of bees, you will hear a ROAR of noisy bees; if the noise is not much or quite soft, you better MAKE a warm day to go inside the hive and inspect for the problem that has caused lost population; If you hear no noise, the bees are dead and probably died of tracheal mite infection which usually kills in December or January. Look inside, and if you find just a cup full of bees with a queen and plenty of honey still there, 9 times out of 10, your bees died of tracheal mite infection because YOU did not install MENTHOL in August, but waited until September or didn't use menthol at all. It is YOUR fault, not the bees fault, or the weather, or the queen, and not even bad luck. It is YOUR LACK OF CARE!

More bees starve to death in the month of March than any other month of the year! Why? That is simple to answer. The queen should have started laying in January regardless of how cold it was or how much snow is on top of the hive. The adult bees had to eat a heck of a lot of honey to raise that brood comb temperature to 91¡-96¡ so the queen could lay eggs and to keep the resulting larvae and pupae alive. Further, bee larvae eat "tons" of food, actually increasing their size over 1200% in just 5 days. A hive enters the winter period on October 1st with 70 pounds of stores. 3 months later, on January 1st, the hive has only consumed about 15-20 pounds of honey in those 3 months, but they might use 10-15 pounds of store in January,

more in February, and even more in March. If your bees die of STARVATION, don't blame anything or anybody but YOURSELF. YOU just didn't care enough to inspect, or take 2-3 hours off from work to inspect during a warm day in January and February. I have listened to people who just couldn't take time off from work, but they took several days off to go deer hunting or travel south to see a Bowl Game. One just has to decide whether they are going to KEEP bees or just HAVE bees.

I have written over and over that it is the NATURAL NATURE OF BEES to store food over brood, in other words store food in the highest bodies and raise brood in the bottommost body and the bees "eat their way uphill" as the winter progresses into spring. This is not hard to understand, nor hard to inspect. On a cold day in January or February, you remove the top and find a great big bunch of bees in the hole of the inner cover should surely tell you something: the bees are high up in the top body and that means that they are short on' stores and need feed NOW, not next week.

When you examine the winners of the Olympic events, the armed service personnel, or the rapid learners of computer use, they are all YOUNG people; and all Kentucky Derby horses are 3 year olds. In April, if your queen is more than 12 months old, she is an OLD LADY. Most commercial beekeepers, whose annual income depends on the performance of their bees requeen every 12 months or sometimes twice each year. The writings of most bee researchers or bee scientists during the past decade clearly endorse annual requeening. Further, I can't name any prominent bee authority that endorse the self requeening of a colony by the bees themselves which fosters inbreeding which results in bringing forward the worst traits of bees and suppressing the sought after good points. Keeping a queen only one year is much more important dependent not only on the race of bees, but the date of your major nectar flow. WHY? The younger the queen, the less likely the bees will swarm. Hence, if your nectar flow is early, like April and May, and hence you need a lot of forager aged bees in early spring to gather that crop, you might use the Carniolan race who has the explosive early spring build-up, and Carniolans are known for their high propensity for swarming. Let's suppose your nectar flow is not early in the spring or that you are not wild about making a large honey crop and you like Italian bees "golden" color or a dozen other reasons for not requeening, but you DON'T like all that treatment with chemicals that is necessary today to keep your bees alive. Bees that are bred for their Hygienic Behavior have shown that they can survive and prosper without the help of so much treatment with chemicals. More and more Queen Breeders and Package Bee Suppliers are now making hygienic behavior a vital part of the traits that they select for BREEDER QUEENS. That in itself, should be a good reason to requeen your colonies. The only "trick" will be to determine which breeders are truly developing bees that demonstrate hygienic behavior as opposed to those who just advertise hygienic behavior, but their bees are just the same as they used to be. It is possible, that some commercial beekeepers will greatly pursue bees of hygienic behavior to avoid the time consuming and expensive treatment of using chemicals, and the word will "get out" just which breeder's bees they are using.

The fact is that most of you readers have colonies that badly need requeening. You just have to decide to do it, when, which race, and with which procedure, and you are only talking about spending perhaps $12, the cost of just 4 jars of honey @ $3/jar. I will write more about requeening methods next month, but right now, why don't you contact the breeder of your choice

and select a time to receive your new queens. For golly sake, get MARKED queens so you see an unmarked queen in your colony one day, you know that your bees have swarmed or your marked queen was superseded. The proper color of marking for 2001 is WHITE.

Why don't you REALLY TRY to make a lot of honey this coming season? You simply can't get a good crop unless you have a large number of foraging age bees ready to collect nectar during the nectar flow; and that takes some planning by the beekeeper, particularly in the central Maryland area where our major nectar flow starts as early as April 15th and ends about May 31st. Forager age bees are bees over 19 days old. Hence, this means if you want a bee to start foraging on May 1st, the queen has to lay the egg that produces this bee on March 21st (40 days before May 1st). It is also going to require a lot of young nurse bees to feed all this new bee larvae and keep the brood and queen warm (91º-96º). Hence, I want to get my queens laying quite well during the entire month of February, so I start feeding 1:1 sugar syrup as an egg laying stimulant about February 1st. Further, since bees and queens move UPWARD with time, you must start REVERSING brood chambers just before you start feeding the syrup, and the reversing might have to done 3, 4, or even 5 times between February 1 and May 1st.

REVERSING is EXTREMELY IMPORTANT not only for promoting egg laying by the queen, but also reversing is a very positive swarm control technique. Let me give you just a bit of explanation. In the absence of any nectar flow, the entire cluster of bees which also includes brood and the queen moves UPWARD as they consume the honey stored about them, thereby leaving the bottom hive body empty, because they need to keep feed near the larva that they are feeding. As the queen's egg laying get blocked by the honey above her, the bees stop her from laying until space becomes available, EVEN THOUGH the whole bottom hive body is empty! Hence, about February 1st, simply reverse the positions of the two hive bodies. Immediately after reversing, the queen, brood, nurse bees, and honey stores are now in the bottom hive body, while the old EMPTY bottom hive body is now on top, 1:1 sugar syrup can be fed through the inner cover hole and there is lots of storage space in this empty body for the bees to store the syrup. Reversing again might have to be done in 30 days or 7 days, dependent upon the weather, the bee population, the egg laying ability of the queen, the frame size, and the amount of 1:1 syrup given daily. Beekeeper experience or knowledge is required here so "the brood is NOT split". When the queen is laying in the top hive body, most of the brood is OPEN brood and some light colored capped brood, and there is just a small amount of darker CAPPED BROOD left in the bottom hive body, it is time to reverse again. Two factors make a tremendous difference in how often you have to reverse: Cluster size and frame size. Using 3 hive bodies of 6 5/8" frames, my first reversal is February 1st, my second reversal is about 3 weeks later and my 4th or 5th reversal near May 1st might just 7-8 days after the previous.

Don't stop the feeding or reversing before April 15th; and if a strong nectar flow starts the bees will stop taking 1:1 syrup during flying weather. All this stimulative feeding and reversing is going to cause a tremendous explosion in population which is a major cause of swarming, so make sure that the bees have plenty of colony space by installing an empty super on top of the brood chamber boxes WITHOUT a queen excluder about April 1st. Examine this super at least once each week, and when 3-4 center frames are partially filled with nectar or brood, put a queen

excluder under the super and make sure that the queen is down below it. Put on 4 more supers of drawn comb (not foundation) ALL AT ONCE about April 15th but before May 1st. Make sure your extractor is in good shape, you have lots of honey jars and labels, and practice your "selling" technique!

If you do NOT have drawn comb and have to use foundation, that is a whole "new ball game". See my previous PINK PAGES. Foundation can only be used one super at a time, and you dare not mix frames of foundation with drawn comb frames in the same super, or you will have a king size MESS.

Many of you are going to either say or unfortunately experience that the use of 1:1 sugar syrup and reversing of brood bodies is going to encourage SWARMING with this population "explosion", and you are absolutely CORRECT! Good beekeeping is utilizing proper bee management methods so that you have a very large number of forager age bees ready to collect nectar when the nectar flow is strong, but you also MUST UNDERSTAND that bees have one tract minds; i. e., they are either in a swarming program or in a nectar collecting program, but never the two programs at the same time.

Let me remind you of my previous lengthy writings about swarming. There is a swarm SEASON, and that is generally early spring about dandelion bloom time, but before the major nectar flow. Swarming at that time is caused by congestion in the brood chamber and/or an older queen, and has nothing to do with space in the SUPERS. Beekeepers can diminish the possibility of swarming by having only a young queen and reversing brood chambers, but sometimes additional techniques have to be employed. In this SWARM SEASON, bees are not thinking very much about nectar collecting, but are absorbed in preparing to swarm which is their NORMAL means of REPRODUCTION. Once the nectar flow starts in earnest, the bees switch their "program" from swarming to nectar collection which provides them with stores to get future generations through the winter coming in about 6 months. Swarming during a major nectar flow is usually caused by a single reason - LACK OF SUPER SPACE, which is 100% beekeeper FAULT.

Honey bees PLAN AHEAD by getting the queen to start laying eggs in January. YOU should plan ahead also on all bee matters to become successful. I will write more about honey production next month, but now I wish you and yours HAPPY NEW YEAR!